Towards a Theory of Freedom

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If I can say yes or no to my destiny, then the Good is not my good unless I agree to it, nothing has value in itself, and man’s freedom is, as Descartes thought, in a sense equal to God’s.

– Merleau-Ponty, ‘Battle over Existentialism’ (1964)

Abstract

Human freedom resides primarily in exercise of that capacity that humans are singularly better at than any other species on earth: the capacity for judgement. And in particular: that special judgement in relation to Self that we call aspiration. Freedom is not the absence of a field of (other) powers; instead, freedom shows up only against the reticulations of power impinging from without. For freedom worthy of the name must be construed as an exercise of power within an already-present field of power. Thus, liberty and causal necessity are not obverses.

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Open Futures

True freedom, according to a certain view of things, is premised on a genuinely open future – not one already foreclosed by the past. Be that as it may, we shall assemble evidence, not so much for the reality of future-openness, so much as for its experienced reality – for its presence in experience. We shall explore the evidence for future-openness in human experience – in human phenomenology. Perhaps there is no one who seriously denies the phenomenology. But the position we shall be occupying rests on an emphasis upon a certain sort of phenomenology – the
phenomenology of power differentials, power structures, and perhaps also power struggles. For instance, the fact that a woman in Afghanistan today cannot imagine herself standing in – never mind aspiring to – any professional relationship to a man is palpable, indeed incontrovertible, evidence of power differentials between men and women in that part of the world.\(^1\) Human social interactions, as we’ll discuss, are negotiated in the context of these power differentials. And we shall argue that the phenomenology of freedom is as present there, in its rawest form, as the phenomenology of power.

The first point to make in connection with freedom is that it doesn’t much matter whether the future is genuinely open if the agent’s conception of it isn’t.\(^2\) For it is not simply that there have to be options open (in some appropriate sense of that term) to the agent. It is that the agent has to be able to conceptualise open options as genuinely live for him- or herself in order to act at all in the familiar sense of that term. As will become clearer as we proceed, conceptualising possibilities is not simply a matter of gathering sufficient information to render a judgement on the matter. Whether an option is open or not is often simply a judgement call that an agent must make – absent evidence in the most significant cases. If the agent is really to be counted free, no one else can make the determination for them. Therein lies freedom. But therein too lies constriction. A pinched or reduced life will remain so, unless change comes ‘from the inside’. It’s a double-edged sword.

Evidence for the phenomenology of freedom, especially in the context of clear power differentials, is undeniably diverse: from the feeling of parental or guardianly power that comes with caring for and instructing children, to that of the powerlessness of the slave in the hands of a faceless and possibly unknown master. Undoubtedly the character of the felt freedom/power is itself alloyed or diluted by corrosive acts of violence or mistreatment of others: from the abuses
of a lowly foot soldier with a weapon, through that of a legitimate authority, to that of the self-appointed tyrant who wrests power against such authorities as may prevail, to that of the terrorist with knowledge and materials to devise a weapon of mass destruction. Each of these cases presents a different experience of power.  

Appreciation of one’s power and freedom can be experienced outside the context of choice, as it must be if the language of ‘power structures’ is at all to make sense as referring to something with an enduring, stable, non-ephemeral quality. Such stability is required if power relations are to condition an agent’s approach to choice episodes, and not merely to effect behaviour in the moment of choosing. So, for instance, consider how it feels to contemplate the approach to your doorstep of a relative you despise because she routinely treats you with contempt. You appreciate even now the enduring tensions between you, even though there is in the present moment no choice to be made. The tensions shape the circumstances in which you will eventually make the choices you will make. They also play a role in determining the sorts of choices you will be making, and whether there are choices at all.

And these tensions come apart from feelings of love and hatred. Consider how it feels to contemplate delivering a poor performance to a well-liked employer or supervisor. Power relations can be relatively independent of personal feeling – though they need not be. I am seeking to draw attention to the experience of power differentials, as such, independent of their potential sources in what may, but need not be, situations of genuine conflict of interest. Interests might merge or diverge in one and the same set of power relations and affiliations: for instance, you and your child might either agree or disagree over the question of the purchase of a toy weapon.
Of course we must be careful not to conflate the feeling of possibilities with their reality. For example, one might question whether, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, any American woman is free. To be sure the life prospects of an American woman are not as narrow in scope as those of an Afghani woman. But the fact that even the American woman cannot conceive of herself in certain so-called ‘male roles’, as articulated by American culture, is evidence of some lack of freedom, despite what she feels when she apparently ‘chooses’ a traditionally female role. Now some sceptics may go too far: they may take this as evidence that none of us are free because our cultures restrict the ways we may conceive ourselves. They propose that in fact this just is the role, or even the definition, of culture. And of course everyone is encultured, so everyone lacks freedom. But this line of argument throws the baby out with the bathwater. For in insisting on absence of constraints, and thereby rejecting the principle that freedom can be quite limited, it forecloses an important insight. In prescribing a menu of self-conceptions, culture can also be enabling or liberating. This is the insight we shall exploit: freedom begins with acts of self-conceptualisation. And these are often hard-won.

The Experience of Power

Many things exercise power over us. We experience that power in our physiological beings: we feel it. For instance, we can feel the natural elements’ power over us – the sun, the wind, the storm, the instability of the ground in earthquake, the power of gravity. But we also feel the power of logic. We feel the power of argument, albeit some of us more strongly than others. If we fail to heed the power of argument, if we resist it too often, we gradually lose the ability to feel it. It is unlike natural elements in that way. These are cases of the experience of powers, as diverse as they are, as present. It is not my intention to articulate here a concept of power, but
only to survey some varied ways we experience it, so as to set the stage for social power and means of resistance.

We can also feel the absence of power, the absence of constraint. The vast expanse of experiences involving appreciation of absence of constraint is also a very diverse one. We can feel a species of absence of constraint when we move; we feel it as the absence of resistance to our motion, for example as one is grasping for a hold in an unanticipated episode of falling. Freedom of logical constraint is another such experience, though this is somewhat harder to illustrate in our phenomenology.

Rene Descartes’ *Meditations* celebrate the author’s discovery of the startling scope of this freedom. Sitting in his armchair before his hearth, Descartes teaches himself – against nature, one might say – to withhold judgement in cases where the evidence at hand is logically insufficient. Descartes exulted unabashedly in this freedom, finding in its expression the very essence of human puissance. Blaise Pascal, by contrast, bemoaned the insufficiencies in his evidence regarding the existence of a divine being: ‘If I saw nothing there which revealed a Divinity, I would come to a negative conclusion; if I saw everywhere the signs of a Creator, I would remain peacefully in faith. But, seeing too much to deny and too little to be sure, I am in a state to be pitied’ (Pascal and Eliot 1910: 229). Pascal experienced Descartes’ freedom as a wretchedness, presaging Dostoevsky’s wise observation: ‘man is tormented by no greater anxiety than to find someone quickly to whom he can hand over that gift of freedom with which the ill-fated creature is born’ (Dostoevsky 1953). Pascal experienced as disempowering that from which Descartes drew strength.

Pascal sought to be rid of a freedom – a freedom to exercise belief at-will in some proposition, due to logical foreclosure of neither it nor its negation. Pascal would be liberated
from this freedom. As Descartes demonstrated, this question whether or not to believe some proposition – for instance on the basis of the testimony of the senses – applies positively everywhere since the testimony of the senses forecloses nothing at all but the cogito. The suspension of belief in the face of evidential insufficiency, which Descartes so eagerly embraced, was treated as a professional credential by phenomenologists from Husserl onwards, under the label of the epoche – the (unnatural) withholding or suspension of judgement so as to enable interrogation of the relationship between the content of an experience and real existents apparently referred to therein. Exercise of this capacity is alleged to bring illumination to aspects of the a priori structure of experience.

But mundane suspension of belief appears to go against human nature. Descartes discovered the freedom to believe or suspend judgement in the armchair. Later, Hume reported that he could not carry this freedom outside his study. Social psychologists would join the debate on Hume’s side: they now speak of a ‘need for epistemic closure’ (Kruglanski 1989). In ordinary life we speak about a general ‘need for closure’ – a need to conclude or bring to rest a matter of some concern. This condition of closure is routinely construed by philosophers as generally at odds with freedom, at odds with openness, even though a preponderance of humanity (as Dostoevsky testifies) wishes to be liberated from this freedom.

Whether we come to agree with Descartes or with Pascal, we must construe existential freedom – the kind we will seek to illuminate here – as something not always at odds with closure. Closure can be liberating. So, as we shall argue, freedom should not be construed as something that stands in opposition to closure, specifically on the topic of oneself. It was Sartre’s mistake to construe freedom as so opposed to closure on this topic. He maintained that a conceptualisation of Oneself, on the basis of a past record, for example, is never warranted
because one’s future is always open, whether one recognises it or not. My argument will seek to establish the following point, contra Sartre: exercise of that capacity for bringing about a certain sort of closure about oneself can be liberating. Because it can be an act of resistance against those prevailing power structures that are operating to keep one ‘down’ in some way, within an existing power hierarchy. Still, a certain amount of openness is required to enable exercises of this ‘closure’. A certain logical gap between the judgement (the proposition affirmed) and all the evidence in one’s possession bearing on it. We shall refer to exercises of ‘closure’ on the topic of oneself as opportunities for power over oneself.

It is important at this point to register a disagreement with Sartre on the signs or marks of freedom – and our alignment in this regard with Merleau-Ponty instead. In regards to the space of my future possibilities, Sartre believed that I can distinguish between those possibilities within my power to realise from those in which I play no part in realising; the latter are marked by fear, and the former by anguish. Suppose that I stand at a precipice, contemplating my possibilities in relation to it. When I contemplate possibilities like stumbling on a stone in the path and falling off the edge of the precipice, that sort of contemplation inspires fear or terror; when by contrast I contemplate the possibility of freely throwing myself off the precipice, I experience anxiety instead. The latter experience Sartre termed vertigo, and suggested a clear division between the categories of fear and vertigo, suggesting it is obvious to the subject of experience which he or she is experiencing on any given occasion.\(^5\)

These dividing lines between fear and vertigo are not so clear to the subject. The experience, as such, is ambiguous\(^6\). Whether the experience is one of genuine freedom (for example, of the ‘monstrous freedom’ available to one of throwing oneself off a precipice) depends upon other things. In my view, it depends upon whether the experience is preceded by a
certain act – an act of judgement – in which one takes stock of oneself as someone who is capable of such things. In other words, it depends upon an act of what I call Self-construction. Such acts of judgement are prefigured in Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of the tortured soldier in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962). There Merleau-Ponty says:

Let us suppose that a man is tortured to make him talk. If he refuses to give the names and addresses which it is desired to extract from him, this does not arise from a solitary and unsupported decision: the man still feels himself to be with his comrades, and, being still involved in the common struggle, he is as it were incapable of talking.

It is as if the man says to himself: ‘I am still a soldier in the service of my country; and my comrades depend upon me to do what I have committed’. This thought sustains the tortured man, not only physically, but in his self-conception; it is the means of maintaining his Self. For it is precisely in not allowing himself the possibility of deviating from this Self to which he has committed that he becomes free to sustain the commitments to which he clings. In establishing for himself certain boundaries, he can be free. If he should allow his Self-conception to waiver, if he should allow himself to consider other possibilities, he will – ironically – not be free to do what he earlier committed to do. This is the deep paradox of freedom, and it shall guide us in what remains of this essay.

**Power over Oneself**

The power over Self, what we shall refer to here as freedom, is a power to be felt too. Its demands we shall refer to as the demands of authenticity. As with the power of argument, if we resist the demands of authenticity too often, we gradually lose the ability to feel them altogether, and eventually we fall into the life of a herd animal.
Let’s begin our work with an example.

Lisa’s story. Lisa Thompson (not her real name) is a sixth-grade student at Springfield Elementary. She is of Mexican descent, from a family recently immigrated to the U.S. She speaks Spanish at home. She is poor. She is ample-portioned. She is routinely teased on the playground for her size and palpable failure to conform to middle-class fashion sensibilities. Still, she excels in every academic subject without exception. However, she is rarely recognized for her achievements. For example, she has consistently performed at the top of her class in math, and yet only her classmate Dan (Anglo-Saxon, male, slight) is ever recognised by their teacher for stellar accomplishments in math – accomplishments that Lisa routinely (if not invariably) exceeds. And although she is eager to please everyone, especially her teachers, she has won the warmth and approval of only one or two. A number of the rest believe her to be a distracting ‘attention-grabber’ and routinely turn a blind eye to her bids to speak in class. Standard aptitude testing discloses she is likely to excel at secretarial work.

What does the future hold for Lisa? Can we know? There is of course a great deal of social-scientific and educational research on just such cases as Lisa’s. Suppose that the research confirms that a full 75 per cent of all such Lisas (all persons sharing her gender, test scores at age 12, social status) become clerical staff for the vast majority of their working lives – for surely the aptitude tests are correct that they can be successful there. But surely if Lisa has genuine alternatives, all bets are just that – gambles on uncertain outcomes, whose relative uncertainty is apparently measurable by the data of the past.

As it happens, our Lisa, already no academic slouch, is also no fool. She can discern that her mind is better than those of most if not all of her classmates. She is increasingly engrossed in
academic subjects: math, science, literature. She becomes an autodidact, by working independently through textbooks beyond the curriculum of her current academic levels. She plans to go to college. In her public high school, she takes all the reputedly difficult subjects and routinely performs at the highest levels in her grade level. In this process her skin thickens to the contempt of disapproving teachers and the ridicule of classmates: she simply doesn’t give their judgements much credit. In this process Lisa learns resistance. She prepares herself to become free, by inoculating herself to the poisons at work in her situation. Because now she has organised things so that she is prepared to conceive of herself as having live options different from those reckoned for her by other. Here is how that story goes.

Lisa’s dilemma. Lisa has arrived at the end of her high school career. Her academic record is stellar, her tests scores at the highest levels. Her career counsellor advises a short stint at a community college, or perhaps a small, local college. Dr T, the teacher she most admires, because he has a Ph.D., tells her that she is not independent-minded enough for university, never mind an academic life. He should know. Best to stick close to home and a modest job – maybe an elementary school teacher. (Dr T teaches her least favourite subject – history – but she works hard to do well in it anyway, for his good opinion, which she has obviously not secured.)

Lisa has sought the approval and encouragement of an admired person, the most eligible mentor in her orbit. But the reception she is receiving is very mixed. His judgement is ultimately negative, for reasons she can hardly fathom. She is poised for free fall into the net below – into the ‘matrix of social expectations’. But she can reject his judgement – as she has done with judgements of so many others. If only she can see through his judgement to see it for what it is – the judgement of a disappointed man, himself a failure. The capability to see through his
judgement is just beyond what she is able to do. Her ability to imagine his life, to consider what it might be like to be in his shoes, is beyond her. So she cannot really know why his judgement on her comes down where it does. Still, she might be able to resist accepting his judgement at face value. At this time in her life that is the extent of her freedom – the extent that past exercises of freedom, in the shape of simply ignoring the disapproval of her peers, has made possible.

Each small inoculation against the judgements of others has enlarged the basis of her freedom, the basis of her own power to ‘stretch’ the matrix to some extent. If she is able to take that next step, to resist his judgement in particular, subsequent vistas will open up, incrementally wider as the power of the matrix around her loosens and relaxes, in proportion to her sustained resistance to it.

This proposal suggests the initially attractive idea: personal power resides in the knowledge of one’s true possibilities, and in the security of this knowledge to reject the judgements and expectations of others, as well as knowledge of the opportunity costs associated with these possibilities. Still, this idea is just a bit too simple, as we will see. By way of presaging that discussion: there really is something to what Dr T has told Lisa. The fact that she is so eager for his blessing is the very evidence – all the evidence he appeared to need. And she can see that herself. Self-knowledge is not the straightforward matter that it is often storied as being (cf. for instance Moran 2001).

By the same token someone might pronounce ‘I am no law-breaker’ or, ‘I brook no corruption’, and in that way pass judgement on oneself as well as on one’s circumstances. This is so-called ‘thick’ description. And in some sense all pronouncements of this kind are groundless: they are made with a modesty of empirical evidence in their corner: ‘This is a Christian nation.’ ‘We are a chosen people.’ There has to be a certain amount of ‘room’, a certain ‘give’ in the
facts on the ground, before statements like these can be uttered without tongue in cheek. Here lies freedom.

**Forms of Power**

Persons with comparatively greater command over resources exercise more of a certain power – they enjoy a larger capacity to threaten others both with force and with noncooperation. These many realities get reflected in their comparative bargaining positions at any proposed bargaining table. Persons with more resources are such as to have the means of softening opportunity costs, as well as the means of creating opportunities not yet open. This is the power described by political theory in all its forms (Max Weber spoke of this basis of power, and it figures large in the work of much of today’s political sociology and political theory; cf. Coleman 1990). This is the sort of power that can be captured in descriptions of causal determinists. Resources are further commodified by social scientists as ‘risk’ and ‘protective’ factors.

But there are sources of power that are insufficiently appreciated as such. They are features that comprise the power to inspire admiration and respect, or the power to attract disciples. Extremes of this power, really aberrations of it at one end of the spectrum, are sometimes referred to as ‘charisma’. A more typical form is the power to tell moving stories of heroism and to paint strange and unfamiliar pictures of poignant possibility, to engage the imagination in profound and moving ways, and thereby to help others imagine in themselves potentials that they otherwise would not, could not or simply do not, in the crush of their social circumstances. This power is enormously constructive. And it is relatively independent of resources. It is rooted instead in simple human capital – which is not really so simple after all, as
we shall see. This form of power is as hard to measure (as a social scientist might wish to do with it) as it is to appreciate in the moment of its exercise.

The power to inspire often plays on some sort of social unfamiliarity: the stranger who enters our community and thrills us with prospects hitherto unimagined. One of our own number who might have sought to do the exact same thing in relation to the exact same possibilities would be met with much more scepticism, for we often discount the powers of those to whom we feel socially connected. It is another social fact: the prophet who is not welcome in his own hometown.

So far in Lisa's story as I've told it, we have not seen this enlivening power at work. It has been part of our story that she has met no prophet. Indeed just the opposite. Still, Lisa might have been more fortunate. She might have been given a hand up. But, sadly, this is not part of our Lisa's tale. Lisa has been exposed only to pushes downward from those whom she has elevated to unwarranted heights in her personal pantheon – in her personal map of the social world. Instead of encouragement Lisa has encountered nothing but obstacles to aspiration. She may not now recognise these things as exercises of power to hold her down, but so they are, and no mistake. Furthermore, the social meanings with which Mexican, immigrant, female and fat are routinely painted around her, add insult to injury. What's more, Lisa is at an informational disadvantage in relation to her appointed oracle Dr T. She believes he sits at a more privileged node for gathering and disseminating social knowledge. He believes the same – and quite plausibly his belief is the source of hers. Lisa is very much inclined, and often encouraged, to discount her own knowledge of herself as worthless, as compared with his wider compass.

Can Lisa overcome the obstacle thrown in her path by the powers Dr T is now exercising? What would she have to do in order to maintain and even elaborate on her current
aspirations? For elaborate she must if she is ever to put any of the vague notions she now has into action. It becomes clear that the power to aspire, for Lisa, is a substantive power. And if she ever achieves it, it will have been hard-won. Self-determination is obviously not without its difficulties for people who suffer low social status and receive no prophecies. I will undertake here to describe Lisa’s cognitive journey towards an aspiration that befits her considerable potential. In many ways, the journey to aspiration is of much greater philosophical moment and poignancy than the pathway from aspiration to its fulfilment.

Objectification of the Self in the Exercise of Freedom

We must now interrupt Lisa’s tale to focus for a time upon general aspects of the phenomenology of an experience of rendering a social judgement.

I am sitting on a favourite park bench. Beside me are rows of blooming flowers. I look up to see tree limbs, with birds flitting about them. Not only is the place and its inhabitants phenomenally present to me, but so too is my perspective upon the entire scene. One way to put this point is to say that only certain aspects of the objects in question – the ‘front’ parts of them, as it were – are phenomenally present to me; but this way of putting things is potentially misleading, as it suggests certain other aspects of these objects are either phenomenally not-present or not phenomenally present. (But how can I intend or represent to myself some aspects of things but not others?) Another way to put the point, and certainly a more compact way, is to say that my perspective is itself phenomenally present to me: in addition to the scene itself, I am presented also with my own perspective on the scene. This perspective, as I will explain now, is a proxy of my Self.
My perspective is importantly salient to me. My perspective integrates much of what I know, so as to help me navigate the present moment. Indeed knowledge of my perspective (however implicit) helps me ‘fill in’ aspects of the scene that I don’t have time to actually take in perceptually (to compute, in the cognitive sense). And when my perspective is challenged, it is as though my very self is. Challenges to cherished beliefs, whether about myself or not, trigger cognitive dissonance – a response that has time and again proven to be a marker of the distressed self-image or self-concept. Thus it is my perspective that marks me as present in a scene I am representing to myself, rather than any intrusions into that scene of my corporeal being – my body.

Interestingly, however, my perspective is not the only one to which I can be treated phenomenally. And appreciating this point will help us appreciate other phenomenally present aspects of things for which it is often hard to assemble or describe evidence.

In the park I spy a man in the distance. I am at liberty to speculate wildly about that man’s relationship to other objects I locate in the space whose very centre (whose ‘origin’ as the geometers say) I occupy – for now, anyway. For instance, I might speculate as to how the man in the distance manages to avoid being blown to one side by gusts of wind, as nearby objects of similar size and apparent heft are now being blown. Wild speculation might be admissible on this point only if I’ve never interacted face to face with objects of his kind. In that (strictly hypothetical) condition I might experience the whole world – indeed, space itself – as emanating from my point of view (my Self) as its centre, a Cartesian point without extension. I am a Subject – an entity with a perspective – upon a universe of Objects themselves without ‘windows’ – available for viewing from the outside, but nothing on the inside looking out. This wildly imaginative ‘take’ on the situation, this wild freedom to see possibilities, is open to me only –
and ironically, as it will be my burden to argue – if my past experiences (for example with humans) is extremely limited.

For let me be looked upon just once – for example by that man as he approaches my park bench. As he catches my gaze I am locked into an experience of vertigo. I am displaced from the centre of the universe, even as I experience that very centre flee from me and towards him (not me!!) as Subject. And suddenly I become no longer Subject, but now one of many Objects – Others – in that universe I once transcended absolutely. An Other in my world – an Other with a capital O – was once upon a time an object distinct from myself, bearing a spatial location to me, and bounded in space and time. Before I encountered this man, I knew Others only as objects or bodies, bounded in time and space, within my universe, I its sole Subject. For, to be an Object is, as Sartre puts it, ‘to be-for-another’ rather than ‘to be-for-oneself’ – the latter is what it is to be a Subject. When I encounter that man’s gaze, I encounter myself, for the first time, as an Other, an object in another subject’s universe. I become phenomenally present to myself as an Object. This experience of ‘objectification’ is absolutely transfiguring, as Simone de Beauvoir and others were at pains to explain – contra Sartre.

For Sartre believed – ironically, indeed perversely – that the ego is permanently able to elude objectification – that therein lies its freedom. For Sartre, the ego is a permanent fugitive, never present even in the moment when reflecting on itself. Beauvoir thought otherwise. I agree with Beauvoir. And I have already shown my hand: the self is present already in its phenomenal representative; it is present in the fact of its own perspective on a scene.\textsuperscript{11} And the gaze turned on me catches me there. Otherwise I should feel no exposure, no terror. The terror I experience at being ‘caught out’ is testimony to my presence in the scene, first as a Subject and subsequently
as an Object. In the transition – the displacement – from the former status to the latter I am objectified.

Ordinary humans embedded in ordinary social contexts have been experiencing objectification from birth – which in repeated experience ultimately adds up to an overcoming of their self-centred universe. They have repeatedly imbibed many such experiences of displacement, in the first instances within the orbit of benevolent adults. In these experiences, surrounded by caretakers, ordinary human beings learn to overcome the illusion of being at the very centre of the universe. To ordinary humans, then, the experience of being trapped in another’s gaze like a fly in amber is so familiar, in fact, so bound up with everyday life, an inalienable dimension of our experience, that we hardly notice it as a displacement. Some of us in fact thrive upon the experience. And each of us appreciates the experience as simply the everyday, far-from-staggering fact that there are Others ‘looking out from behind’ those faces with whom we have made first-personal contact. We are not simply seeing eyes in these interpersonal episodes. For to see the gaze, as such, requires going behind the eyes to imaging the perspective looking out from them.

Looking upon another face is, for the ordinary adult, simply an everyday occurrence of being presented phenomenally with another perspective that’s not one’s own. (Cognitive development leading up to this everyday experience is, as we have come to appreciate in autism, neither to be taken for granted, nor easily theorised about.)

‘Perspective-shifting’ is a feat ordinary (normal) human beings perform with ease – so practiced in it are we that we no longer experience ourselves as making an effort. But understanding the phenomenology folded in it will reveal a profound fact: that the capacity to appreciate the phenomenal presence of other subjects, and thereby to appreciate oneself as an
Other, an object, is the ground for a phenomenal appreciation of the extents and boundaries of one’s own freedom as a social being.

Sartre had sought to locate freedom in the ‘transcendence of the ego’ – in the retreat of the ‘I’’s current location to higher and higher levels of removal, upon self-reflection and in episodes of objectification. (First, I reflect upon the fact that I am looking at a tree; then I reflect upon the fact that I am reflecting upon the fact that I am looking at a tree; then I reflect upon my metareflection; and so on, apparently indefinitely, and at each stage moving outside the orbit of the reflected upon.) The project of depicting the ‘I’ as effecting indefinite retreats was to be emulated some decades later by Harry Frankfurt (1971). But Sartre (and Frankfurt too, though less obviously so) misidentified the exercise of freedom. For freedom does not lie in the retreat from view – it does not lie in fugitive recession; it lies instead in the subsequent negotiations of one’s characteristics – negotiations that transpire in the decided aftermath of having been caught in amber. Because the Self does not automatically retreat – not in the context of an Other. Retreat in such contexts is in numerous instances befitting only of a coward.

Freedom lies at least partly in accepting or rejecting judgements about oneself, in embracing or repulsing adjectives and attributions, both privately and publicly. It lies also, and somewhat more visibly, in the alliances one accepts or declines, offers or withholds (see also Thalos 2012). Thereby one constructs oneself, as well as negotiates one’s social space. The exercise of freedom demands painful labour on and in relation to one’s Self, not elusive and lofty absence from the scene, and not transcendence from mundane adjectives. And all this messy negotiation transpires in the aftermath – in the very context – of objectification and self-objectification.
The Powers of Conceptualisation and Affiliation

Sartre talked about monstrous freedom. This freedom is monstrous insofar as it allows individuals, in their future-oriented consciousness, to go against even their own self-precedents. Because Sartre (in certain of his Cartesian moments) conceives of future-oriented consciousness as a human being’s essence; a conscious person is not an object at all: he or she is free from a permanent essence of any kind. For this reason Sartre believed that one can only affirm a ‘false self’ if one ascribed to oneself a constant or unchanging quality. There is some truth in this idea, but it is still not fully formed. What I want to do next is simply invite the reader to reflect on the phenomenology of this type of freedom, to reflect on the experience of power in one of the most critical of all social experiences – in what I will call the Social Look. Take, for example, Lisa’s:

Lisa’s Look: Dr T teaches ancient history. He holds a Ph.D. from a nearby university. He has taught high school ever since. Lisa asks him whether he might write her a letter for her applications; she’s considering applying to the following list of colleges and universities. He tells her that to be successful she will need, not only to apply herself, but also to develop some independence of mind. In conveying the message, he also gives her a look that says: ‘You are a fat Mexican girl; you exist only for domestic work or mothering; of course you have no genius; therefore you are now and always will be a subordinate.’ The subtext is conveyed not through words but through a combination of expressions, postures and condescending physical contact. There is a hint of contempt in this look, a bloodless smugness. Sometimes Lisa receives this same message from another woman, whose attitude of course is one of being a co-slave – someone who, as a slave, judges Lisa as no better than she is herself.
Lisa, being the sensitive soul she is, is familiar with the message, the demeaning judgement, the devaluation in it commanding an assent in an acknowledging return-gaze or a gaze-drop.

But Lisa has practiced not acknowledging the judgement. She has long ago now stopped feeling the shame of being looked upon in these terms. Long ago she became inoculated to these episodes of humiliation, or perhaps she never even experienced the downgrades contained in them, absorbed as she was in her own intellectual interests. And so now she can resist the judgement, whilst accepting the label (‘woman’, ‘Mexican’, ‘fat’ – whatsoever it is) without the experience of marginalisation. And so when Lisa accepts any such label (‘woman’ or ‘Mexican’ or ‘fat’) she can do so as an act of free affiliation – as an act of personal self-affirmation or self-creation. She can return a gaze that, contrary to expectation, says: label accepted, negative judgement unshared.

Someone different – and perhaps Lisa herself in an alternative world – might have experienced the power of Dr T’s efforts quite differently, felt ‘looked down’ upon, felt deprived of the ability to go forward with her plans. But not Lisa. Lisa sees the gaze, perhaps even sees the attempt to exert power over her in it, refuses the experience of being looked down upon, cognisant as she is of the ample evidence that she does not deserve it. She turns that experience of the gaze into something it was not intended on the other end: she seizes it as an opportunity for exercising power, an opportunity to make something further of herself. She can now reject this ‘independence of mind’ (whatsoever it happens to be) as valuable. Or, to the same effect, she can claim that she is indeed independent-minded, but that independence of mind is not what he and others thinks it is. She has a number of options in relation to the label ‘independence of mind’. She has the power to make the label attach to a concept that favours her. She can take the
upper hand of power away from Dr T in relation to that label. She can wield it herself but to a
different effect. She can exercise the power at which humans are so good: conceptualisation.

Among acts of conceptualisation, the act of stipulation is among the most explicit, and
most subversive. Try to think back to the time you made your first terminological stipulation. Do
you remember the feeling of exposure? The feeling of exposure comes with the exercise of
subversive power. Or consider what it might be like to try to convince people that there is a
difference between being a vegetarian motivated by respect for animals and one motivated by
health concerns; in many pockets of many societies – even in some corners of Western society –
such a proposed distinction will encounter resistance, and its introduction will thus be
subversive, and its maker will feel exposed. Making distinctions can be exercises of political
power, and this is due entirely to the fact that when human beings act, their actions are
constituted in part by the conceptions under which they undertake their actions, as well as the
conceptions that they themselves create via their actions.

When Lisa resolves her dilemma – for instance when she resolves the matter in favour of
the proposition that she is not lacking in independence of mind – she is also exercising power
over her own self conception, her own identity, her own Self. But she has other alternatives too.
For instance she can refuse the gaze entirely, not even notice the judgement, or at any rate pay it
no mind – refusing the very experience of being ‘looked down’ upon. Furthermore she can
decide to refuse from that time forward any circumstances that make gazes like it possible. These
are just a few ways that episodes of social power struggle can unfold, when the entities in
question have conflicted interests at stake, when there are horses of different colour in the race.

In the social gaze one feels the exercise of social power at its rawest, depending upon the
nature of power differentials. One there feels the power of human contact in acts of social
judgement. There too one can feel the power of being drawn close, of being pushed away, of being pushed down, of being buoyed up. These can be welcome or unwelcome. They can be accepted or resisted. In all this is the negotiation of the social map – the map of alliances, oppositions and enmities. Thus an existential analysis of the social gaze can serve as a theoretical foundation for a theory of social and political resistance.

Return to Lisa’s current dilemma, what to do after high school. But those aren’t really the terms in which she is considering her options. She is instead caught upon the horns of another question, the question of whether to accept or reject her hero’s judgement – whether she is sufficiently independent-minded to go to university. These are the true terms in which she is conducting her inner debate. She is deciding how to conceive of herself. Is she independent-minded enough, or is she merely the poor, fat Mexican girl fated to keep someone else’s files tidy? She is deciding who she is. She is constructing her Self. Or, more to the point, she is deciding whether or not to accept the constructions of others as her own. The tissues of social identity are made of such stuff. And they are stern enough.

Beauvoir was intimately acquainted with these matters. She describes, for instance, the phenomenology of accepting the label of ‘woman-and-not-man’ as one of being penumbral and antithetical to man: the negative, the ‘abnormal’, the deficient and therefore the ‘marked’ case within an overarching class of which ‘man’ is the central and normal. ‘Humanity is male’, she writes, ‘and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him … She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other’ (de Beauvoir 1984 [1949], Introduction).
It is no wonder then that accepting a label like ‘woman’ in one set of circumstances can be alienating: accepting the label can make it impossible for subject and object to meet on the ground: for instance, when Lisa judges herself as a ‘woman-and-not-man’ she might be judging herself as permanently an object, a body not fit for habitation by a subject. How can she draw such an object close in any sort of embrace? Of course Sartre was not concerned about this question – for he thought (wrongly, of course) that subject and object never could meet in the same scenario in any case. But if what has been said thus far about self-judgement is correct, then subject and object must meet. Because there can otherwise be no exercise of freedom.

Subject and object meet in the moment when Lisa judges herself, from her own perspective, as ‘woman-and-not-man’ but also ‘sufficiently independent-minded’. They meet when Lisa, in a moment of pure judgement from her own perspective (not borrowing someone else’s), stretches out her conceptual arms and embraces being a woman.

Since Beauvoir, many persons on ‘the margins’ have answered that sometimes embracing a derogating label (for example, ‘gay’) is itself a way of upturning and restructuring the conceptualisation associated with categories that enjoy a dominant/inferior or healthy/diseased conceptual structuring. They have thought that embracing – and not merely accepting passively – is a way of resisting, a way of re-valuing the penumbral, even of casting it adrift of its orbit around the ‘normal’, so as ultimately to render it an independent term of approval, or at any rate as simple matter-of-fact, no longer a term of abuse. It takes many such acts of embrace to achieve true re-valuation; therein lies the hard work of resistance. Embracing a derogated label is a subversive act because it is a move that goes against the grain in the dance of meaning-making. It is a move that seeks to redirect the movements of ‘the herd’. A proliferation of such acts and the resistance might triumph.
Lisa is, from a metaphysical point of view, free either accept or reject Dr T’s judgement. Logic forecloses neither option. And indeed this is the issue for her. But if she chooses against her own perspective – the perspective of someone who has long known herself more than capable of performing at the highest academic levels – she will be allowing others to construct her. She will be living an inauthentic life.

To construct herself authentically, Lisa will have to take an objectifying perspective on herself, to take a perspective on herself as both Subject and Object, a perspective on which she is more than capable of the task she aspires to. In other words, she has to embrace her aspiration as sourced by herself. And if she fails to do that, she will fail to side with her own perspective. She will have failed to stand beside herself, as Subject to her own Self as Object, in a stance of solidarity.

And so freedom, in its authentic exercise, requires being phenomenally present to oneself, literally beside oneself, in precisely the way one is typically present to others: as an object of judgement. This thesis is one that Sartre incorrectly denied. Freedom lies in the sometimes-painful exploitation of opportunities for making a something of oneself, of accepting a label in an affirming way. The more derogated the label, the sharper the exercise of freedom. The harder-won when it is achieved. Freedom does not reside in the liberty to remain, permanently, a nothing.

**Subject and Object: Sartre v. Merleau-Ponty**

Maurice Merleau-Ponty was also disappointed in the ‘antithetic’ character of Sartre’s philosophy – in the fact that subject and object never meet, never resolve into a unity: ‘the antithesis of my view of myself and another’s view of me and the antithesis of the for-itself [the subject] and the
in-itself [the object] often seem to be alternatives instead of being described as the living bond and communication between one term and the other.’ (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 72). He felt that Sartre’s position in Being and Nothingness (1943) was incomplete, unresolved. He felt that Sartre did not sufficiently appreciate the reality of contingency, of the fact that the character of human consciousness has ultimately to be qualified – to accept qualifiers, to be the object of an act of conceptual judgement.

The point here is simply this: the very structure of our consciousness is contingent. Our ability to integrate experience depends on the physical machinery to which it is bound. Similarly, the ability to integrate – more specifically, to nest – one perspective within another, to represent the Other as a subject too, must be contingent. It didn’t have to work that way.12

How does all this apply to Lisa’s situation? My contention is this: we routinely manipulate the nesting of perspectives to serve our goals. And this ‘management’ of perspectives is elemental to social power. Consider again Lisa’s situation:

Dr T is telling Lisa she is insufficiently independent-minded for her apparent aspiration (to go to university). She is currently an object of both their consciousnesses. But (contingently, of course) they have different perspectives on this object. Furthermore, they have asymmetrical information. Lisa has in one sense a much better appreciation of what she’s capable of, because she has much more information about her performance record, and how hard things are for her (not at all hard). On the other hand, her confidence in her own judgement is being shaken by his pronouncement, in light of the position and status he occupies in the local environs and in her pantheon. Dr T’s judgement is weighted by his locus in the power nexus. Lisa’s power, by comparison, is nil. And, importantly, Lisa is no way party to knowledge of the unspoken motivations that might be at work beneath the surface of Dr T’s awareness. Is there racial or
gender bias in his judgement? Is he motivated to want others to fail where he has not himself been particularly successful? She can have no insight into this. Thus their perspectives are quite different, incapable of being integrated. Lisa has to resolve the tensions in her perspective if she is to move forward. (Note that, by contrast, Dr T does not, since the judgement doesn’t bear on any decision he is currently facing.)

What will Lisa do? Will she cave before Dr T’s judgement? What does that caving look like – and what are its consequences for her? Obviously caving involves taking on at least some aspects of Dr T’s perspective: she might for instance take on the perspective that girls from her background are insufficiently well prepared. If, for instance, she has noticed that he judges that Dan is sufficiently prepared, she might make a note of just how she and Dan differ, and blame various aspects of her background for her lack of preparation. But what does that look like phenomenologically? It looks something like this: Lisa considers herself – an object with such-and-such fixed qualities, caught in amber under her own, self-reflexive gaze – and passes on herself the judgement that she is insufficient for the relevant aspiration. Subject and Object are merging. And in this process she implicitly knows that she is adopting (some) aspects of Dr T’s perspective – an ‘outside’ perspective on herself. She is judging herself ‘with the herd’. And at some level of consciousness she might well be aware of how this perspective is different from the perspective with which she began – the more authentic perspective on herself. But what does that look like, and what does it look like to side with that other perspective, in that alternative scenario? This other scenario differs from the one we have just reviewed – not in that subject and object fail to merge, for they do here as well – but rather in that Lisa does not disown the perspective with which she entered the process. She maintains that perspective, and simply (once again) considers herself – an object with such-and-such fixed qualities, caught in amber under
her own gaze, but this time a kinder gaze – and passes on herself the judgement that she is (as she has always thought) sufficient for the relevant aspiration.

It is not that she is nothing when she reflects upon herself, as Sartre would contend (and in this matter joins forces with his own nemesis Descartes). Rather, she is a very definite something. A very powerful something. An authentic something. (And in this we are affirming an insight around which the Kantian model of the Self is built – that the Self and its creation is founded on a judgement, an act of Reason exercised in the Practical mode.) True: Lisa is a something in the alternate scenario too. But there she is clearly not as powerful a something. For the judgement rendered in the alternate scenario is not authentic – not rooted in her fullest knowledge of herself, not rooted even in a perspective that she initially embodied, but instead one that had to be borrowed for the occasion. We are all of us ordinary folk so good at borrowing each others’ perspectives, to see what things might look like from another vantage point. But this capability comes with risks.

Thus authenticity too can be experienced; it is the feeling of knowing that one’s own perspective was more weighty in one’s ultimate judgements. This authenticity can make it possible for Lisa to continue breathing life into her aspiration, rather than having to allow it to expire, stillborn. But we recognise now how imperilled the freedom to do so can be.

Summarising Lisa’s achievements when she refuses to cave: she exercised her powers of judgement, over herself, and in the process affirmed herself as a certain, powerful entity against the judgements that threatened otherwise (and she knew what they were because she was able to see things from the ‘alien’ perspective as well). This is a major accomplishment. And because it is exercised under pressure and resistance from the perspective of the ‘herd’, we have evidence that this is the exercise of true freedom.
Before we move on, we should give thought to the sort of case that Lisa’s is. Her case might seem too easy – ready-made and perhaps idealised for expository purposes, a best-case-scenario for the exercise of freedom. Will messy real-world cases differ only in degree, or will they also differ more substantially? Consider Lisa’s twin sister Lily, born with all the same potentials for academic accomplishment as Lisa, as well as all the same features that, in the same context, make for disadvantage. As it happens, Lily loses faith in her capacities early in life, under the relentless attack of others; she does not manage to pull off the little inoculations that Lisa learns to be so good at. In her last year of secondary school, Lily’s academic record is poor, and her self-esteem is shattered. What chance has she to perform the feat of authenticity that Lisa has accomplished in our story? What chance does she have at freedom? What would it take to give her a better chance? Perhaps in her case it requires a Prophet – a teacher the obverse of Dr T – let’s call her Dr S, in mathematics, a subject in which one would expect her, as Lisa’s twin, to excel. But because of her esteem issues, Lily has nowise excelled up to now. Still, Dr S is a sensitive soul who takes seriously the small glimpses of Lily’s genius. So she challenges Lily in engaging ways, and draws out of her some stellar performances. She waits for an opportune moment, and suggests to Lily that she really is college material, and that she is likely to do exceedingly well there in a more favourable setting. Now Lily is in an anti-parallel position to Lisa. Either she can accept Dr S’s view of her, or she can maintain her present, unfavourable view of herself. What is the ‘authentic’ response here? It seems that Lily has to reject her previous conception of herself in order to be free. If a subject at any point has hold of a ‘false self’, how can he or she ever move beyond it? Is there any possibility of freedom after that? And if there is, what relation does the path to freedom in such an instance bear to the path in an instance such as Lisa’s? This is no small worry. It is precisely the question of how to instil
realistic aspirations into people who (unlike Lisa) have been beaten down. And it is ultimately not an academic question, but a practical one.

Still, one would like to know how to describe the path to freedom, if not necessarily to provide a prescription for how to get someone onto it. In the tools I’ve advanced here, the path requires bringing about in the subject an aspiration that she, the subject, sees as live. And finding ways to ‘keep faith’ with that aspiration at every point of potential attack or deflation. It is worth repeating: this is no mean feat in a power-stratified world where the structures of power follow lines of race, gender and class, and do not follow lines of capability and character. And in no way should what I have said thus far be viewed as a recipe for how to perform the task. Performing the feat requires the expenditure of enormous human capital of the sort that we have only gestured at by the words ‘charisma’ and ‘prophecy’. But if what I have said is right, then the conclusion of the process must be the same: the subject will embrace an ascription of herself as capable and this must be in harmony with her own perspective on herself. Lily does not have such a perspective on herself right now. The prophet’s task must be to help her see herself differently – help her see herself in a way that is not foreclosed by the evidence but is nonetheless more generous to her. The how of it is well and truly difficult. And it is something that Lily must ultimately do herself, albeit with help. But the efforts of activism must always be aimed at such a conclusion.

**Domination**

The account I have presented presents the flip side of domination – the obverse of the experience of powerlessness. Scholars who talk about domination construe it as a subspecies of power – that
species which, as George Simmel (1950) remarked, operates on the internal resistance of a subject, rather than merely on the subject’s behaviour.\(^\text{13}\)

The experience of domination has been the subject of feminist scholarship ever since Beauvoir dipped her influential oars into these waters. Beauvoir spoke of the subjugation of woman in terms of the experience of \textit{ab-} or \textit{a-normality} – in terms of certain value-laden construals of the difference between opposing categories (such as male and female), and how this construal comes to characterise the experience of falling into one of these categories (for example, being female) as contrasted with falling into the other (being male). This is objectification.

Objectification (in Beauvoir’s terms) involves negative judgements about those who fall outside the so-called \textit{normal} – those who do not enjoy the canonical or paradigm position in a category – and who on that basis deserve different treatment. Today feminists have been joined by scholars seeking to speak for many other groups of persons who find themselves disadvantaged by relentlessly self-perpetuating forms of oppression and discriminatory social practices. They have sought to make sense of the perpetuation of these disadvantages, and in so doing to equip activists with useful tools for their practice. Much of what has been done in this area of scholarship has focused on how a given difference (in whatsoever biological or perhaps psychological dimension it happens to lie) is constructed as a basis for hot hatred or cool discrimination. Much interesting phenomenological work has been conducted on this topic. Some of this work – quite orthogonal to the concerns of this essay – involve how difference is experienced, and how that very experience shapes bodies and behaviours.\(^\text{14}\) One of the most important ideas that have emerged in this scholarship is that of the anonymous gaze (see for instance Käll 2010, for a feminist account of it) – which quite often results in oppressed persons
in possession of corrosive self-conceptions masquerading as objective self-images, because the subjects achieve them by seeking to gaze on themselves as though from the perspective of a disinterested or impartial third party. Research on this topic has sought to identify this anonymous gaze as a possible instrument of domination – a means by which certain members of the population are gotten to self-policing. Some of this work is inspired by the brilliant work of Michel Foucault (see Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983), which traces the origins of subject-hood itself to disciplinary social practices. The poststructuralists who have followed in Foucault’s footsteps, however, decline to give much space to the ideas of freedom at all.

There has been some doubt as to whether the accounts of domination so far delineated are genuinely illuminating, much less capable of providing tools of resistance to or liberation from oppression. The trouble, it seems, is that these accounts depict forces of oppression as irresistible, leaving no room for an independent subject in them.¹⁵ The phenomenological and sociological elements in these accounts eclipse or mask the existential element. For instance, the gender norms that result in accentuating differences between male and female are depicted by Young (1990a, b) as an obstacle to freedom. But at least some critics claim this barrier to freedom is overstated. Chisholm (2008: 11) writes:

Young overstates gender when she foregrounds women’s past interpellation of femininity and their negative experience of embodiment as ‘typical’ of all women at all times. She narrows the field of phenomenological inquiry to prohibitive feminine motility and experience to the exclusion of women’s transformative experience, while establishing masculine motility as the idealized norm. Her focus on feminine motility and spatiality precludes analysis of how girls and women can and do embody free movement despite masculine domination. She fails to direct phenomenological inquiry to the change in
women’s embodied experience and situation, to their ascendance in the world, since ‘Throwing Like a Girl’ was first presented in 1977.

But how can we keep from overstating the case against freedom? My strategy (fundamentally Merleau Pontean) has been to show how elements that can from one angle be viewed as obstacles to freedom can be utilised from another angle as stepping stones, via acts of self-construction, that are performed in the process of self-objectification. Foucauldian insights on the Self are fundamentally incomplete, because the idea that subject-hood has its origin in disciplinary practices is ultimately false. My account focuses expressly on the means of resisting the objectifying gaze – which I believe is the premier tool for resisting domination. If the anonymous gaze experienced by would-be victims of domination reaches them early in life, the job of domination becomes easier. The tools I am proposing for purposes of resistance are premised on the principle that the instruments of domination can be turned into ploughshares. To understand how these tools of subversion work, we need to understand the role of conceptualisation in the process of objectification. My contention has been that when we do so, we will see that the use of judgement can be subversive, as subversive as any political ploy or instrument of war. Conceptualisation, when it is employed in the negative way that Beauvoir documented – namely, to effect domination – works to produce marginalisation by drawing attention to differences in negative ways. When this process of objectification is seen for what it is, it becomes possible to resist it. It becomes possible to embrace labels in a way that affirms the positive and refuses the marginalisation. And in that way, to respond with a return gaze that does not accept the negative judgement in the original gaze, or even in the anonymous gaze. Understanding how conceptualisation operates, in social and political contexts, provides us with instruments for turning the social arena into one where liberation can occur, in the very contexts
in which domination and the oppression occasioned by it have hitherto prevailed. Because social knowledge really is power. The truth about domination really can help set its victims free. Knowledge about domination is at the core of freedom from it.

**Conclusion**

On the view we have articulated, freedom is an individual’s exercise of judgement in relation to his or her own qualities (his or her Self), particularly if that judgement counters or otherwise confronts judgements conferred on him or her by more socially powerful Others who exercise their powers of judgement against him or her. One way of construing this is as a theory that illuminates domination by way of articulating its polar opposite. That makes it a theory in the area of politics or political philosophy. Another way to construe this is as offering a sketch or fragment of an account of at least some of what we wish to illuminate when we speak of liberty, at least in social contexts. That makes it preliminary to a theory of the metaphysics of (moral) freedom as the obverse of (moral) necessity, and perhaps also as offering the most eligible examples and evidence for the former as against the latter. I intend both construals. I believe – much in the same way as Aristotle did – that a theory of moral freedom is ultimately also a theory of politics, in the spirit of the dictum that the human being is the quintessential political animal. If my contentions about freedom here are correct, illuminating liberty has very little, if anything at all, to do with showing how freedom is in some way contrary to or compatible with causal necessity. Moral liberty and causal necessity are not obverses. Consequently, moral responsibility – which goes hand in hand with freedom – is not the obverse of causal necessity either.
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References


Notes

1. It becomes clear then how employment as a sex worker in the prostitution industry can there – as elsewhere – be viewed as an improvement in one’s personal life.

2. Conversely, it doesn’t matter if the future is genuinely closed, if the agent’s conception of it isn’t; this point is at the heart of Frankfurter-style counterexamples.

3. Power has been conceived in a wide variety of ways. The essays in Lukes (1986) exemplify that diversity. Nothing I will be contending here depends on any specific concept of power.

4. Again, I make no commitment to any analysis of power.

5. Vertigo is discussed at length in Part I of Being and Nothingness.

6. Merleau-Ponty seems to be in agreement: ‘in this exchange between the situation and the person who takes it up, it is impossible to determine “the share contributed by the situation” and “the share contributed by freedom”’ (1962, 453).

7. This point raises an interesting question, however: Can one, under the very same conditions as one might pronounce ‘This is a Christian nation’, also pronounce ‘This is a racist nation’ – and thereby engage in a parallel act of meaning-making? Can one pronounce ‘I am a lawbreaker’ and thereby embrace a value? Can this make sense? We do not have space here to discuss this question, but cf. Thalos (2012).
8 Siegel (2006) can be construed as sharing my view, in addition to holding the idea that the objects in the scene are presented as independent of that perspective.

9 This observation is the foundation of a school of empirical research, inspired by the work of social anthropologist E. Becker, known as Terror Management Theory: Becker (1973), Greenberg et al. (1990, 1997).

10 There is an enormous psychological literature on this subject. Cooper (2007) provides an insightful overview.

11 This perspective is what allows me to ‘time travel’ through memory. My episodic memories are stamped with my presence in the scene via this element of perspective.

12 It would seem that autistic persons cannot get this to work at all – their social phenomenology is different from ours (see for example Hobson 1993).

13 This is not a universal conception of domination; see for instance Pettit (1997), who does not make this distinction. Pettit treats domination as others – for instance Arendt, Weber and Goldman – speak of the larger category of power. Pettit therefore thinks that there is no use for the term power that is not already covered by the concept of domination.

14 Feminists have for instance studied gendered practices that involve the exercise of self-discipline, such as dieting, restricting one's movement so as to avoid taking up too much space, and keeping one's body properly hairless, attired, ornamented and made up. In a landmark study of such practices, Sandra Bartky (1990: 80) observes: ‘it is women themselves who practice this discipline on and against their own bodies …. The woman who checks her make-up half a dozen times a day to see if her foundation has caked or her mascara run, who worries that the wind or rain may spoil her hairdo, who looks frequently to see if her stockings have bagged at the ankle, or who, feeling fat, monitors everything she eats, has become, just as surely as the inmate in the
Panopticon, a self-policing subject, a self committed to relentless self-surveillance. This self-surveillance is a form of obedience to patriarchy’. Cf. also the work of Young (1990a, b), Butler (1990) and Cudd (2006).

Allen (1999, 2011) has been especially critical. She is no less critical of the Foucauldian strand of research conducted by Butler (1990 and modified in 1993) as she is of the work of feminist phenomenologists such as Young (1990a, b).